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The Value of Rural America

The value that Americans place on rural places and rural people finds expression in a variety of ways—art, literature, music, advertising, as well as public policy. The reasons vary, as do the manifestations. Some value rural areas for what they are, others for what rural areas are not, and still others for what they believe rural areas are or are not. Since values are at the heart of policymaking, it is important to understand how we value rural America.

Values drive public policies. In one way or another, they define ends and shape means. Historically, rural policy—broadly defined as governmental efforts to assist rural people and places—has stemmed primarily from two values—equity and efficiency. Thomas W. Bonnett (1993) cites four "equity-based" rationales for rural policy: 1) government has historically promoted rural development and therefore should continue to do so; 2) government is morally obliged to ensure that its citizens, regardless of where they live, have access to certain essential services; 3) government is morally obliged to improve rural-urban equity by giving special attention to rural areas; and 4) government owes rural areas for disparities created by past policies and programs.

Rationales for rural policy based on a value for economic efficiency assert that absence of certain goods and services in rural America leads to inefficient use of rural resources—land, labor, and capital—creating a drag on the national economy and thus justifying Federal intervention.

Counter arguments, however, exist for both. As for equity, some would argue that people are free to choose where they want to live, but in doing so must accept the tradeoffs that accompany those choices. In rural areas, this thinking goes, residents may forego certain goods and services to obtain such benefits as open space, less congestion, or cleaner air. Conversely, urban residents may forego open space and clean air to obtain economic and cultural benefits. Furthermore, equity is hard to define when the goods and services considered essential are also open to debate.

Critics of the efficiency argument point out that the U.S. economy has grown substantially since World War II despite lagging performance in the rural economy. They may also dismiss the notion that the market has failed rural America, believing instead that it has allocated items in an economically rational way. Most efficiency advocates, in fact, believe that governmental efforts to promote rural development "traps" resources in under productive economies and in doing so reduce the Nation's overall level of economic performance. They argue that rural development is essentially a social policy and cannot be justified on economic grounds.

Another Kind of Value

Values for rural equity and/or national efficiency, however, are not the only ones related to rural America. A different sort of value—one based on Americans' collective appreciation for rurality itself, or at least particular elements of it—also exists. But what exactly is that value? What do we as a Nation cherish about our rural areas? Not simply esoteric questions, these are important guides. As John Logan put it, "...what we value in rural America sets the agenda for public policy" about rural America.

This special issue of *Rural Development Perspectives* results from a symposium held in the spring of 1995. At that

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symposium, participants from a wide range of disciplines—including some not usually associated with rural development—discussed the value that Americans place on our rural areas. The following articles represent only a fraction of that free-ranging conversation. Written by experts in literature, history, urban sociology, and landscape architecture, the articles trace the logic and history of both prorural and antiurban values in America and show why those values are so persistent and powerful in American myth, reality, and political and social discourse.

Value of Rurality

For many people, rurality connotes intrinsic value. That value can be positive, as expressed by such rural descriptors as pastoral, bucolic, and untamed. It can be negative, as in desolate, backward, and isolated. These values have developed throughout the Nation's history and are expressed in its literature, art, music, popular culture, political opinion, and residential preferences. Furthermore, Americans value rurality for what it is, what it is not, and what they believe it is or is not.

Like many other values, the value of rurality varies across time and culture. And like many values, it is often defined by its antithesis. As white is to black, rural is to urban. The first two articles in this issue focus on the historical development of prorural values and the interplay between rural and urban images in American thought and discourse. William Howarth, professor of English at Princeton University, traces the rural versus urban dynamic through most of this Nation's recorded history, providing examples from the exploration of the New World, the settling of the frontier, and the modern era. He draws upon literature to look at the prevailing views of rural America and observes that nostalgia for rural roots increases during periods of rapid social and economic change. He contends that expressing rural values is a mechanism used to stem fears of cultural loss.

This theme is mirrored in landscape architect Herbert Gottfried's observation that rural values are tied to the land as symbols of social and natural stability. He believes that rural landscapes contain coherent images that stabilize everyday life. The rural landscape is, he argues, a "layered phenomenon," comprising the marks of human activity interwoven with natural endowments. He suggests that enhancing the legibility—the sensory experience—of the landscape, improves the value of rurality.

Historian David Danbom points out that America's reverence for rural life developed slowly and changed substantially over time. The early colonists viewed rurality as dangerous, unsophisticated, and even wicked, instead revering the city like their European cousins. That view changed with the American Revolution. The new Nation's rural areas, populated largely by independent, land-owning farmers, stood in contrast to Britain's stratified society and provided a strong foundation for the development of America's democratic institutions. As the Nation became increasingly urban, rural America's cultural stock continued to climb precisely because it was not urban. In essence, Danbom contends that celebrating rural is a way of criticizing urban-industrial life.

John Logan, an urban sociologist, further explores the anti-urban sentiment that gives rise to rural value. That anti-urban bias, he points out, is perplexing in several ways. First, racial prejudice toward urban concentrations of Blacks and Hispanics ignores rural America's large minority population. Second, the things feared lost in urban areas—family, community, hard work—are, in fact, still there. Finally, the ills of urban society—crime, poverty, familial breakdown—are also found in rural areas. Hence, Logan shares Howarth's belief that prorural values are a protective mechanism against cultural loss regardless of the fact that a large share of what is valued is the "mythology and symbolism of rural places rather than their reality." Thus, the value of rurality is not only based on what it is not, but also in part on a misconception of what it is (Willits and Luloff). This should come as no surprise since, according to Logan, "rural America has the special advantage of being the place where most of us don't live any more, which frees us to reconstruct it in our imagination."

Implications for Rural Policy

The results of this exploration into the value for rurality suggest that there is merit in considering that value in rural policymaking. Stemming from various roots, however, the value placed on rural America, with it's complexities and contradictions, defies facile manipulation. Rather, the value placed on rural America presents policy makers with difficult questions.

First, whose values should prevail in decisions about rural America? Rural Americans who live and work there? Urban Americans who don't, yet comprise the Nation's vast majority? While the two groups surely hold some values in common, there are just as surely many differences. Can rural and urban interests find enough common ground to forge solutions that satisfy both?

Second, if much of what people value in rural America stems from misconceptions and myths, what does that say about policy based on those values? Does providing more accurate information on the structure of rural economies, the prevalence of social problems, and the degree of environmental degradation dampen the value Americans have for rural people and places? Does a more accurate representation of rural circumstances undermine the basis for rural policy?

These questions are as important as they are difficult. They represent a fresh, and potentially fruitful, line of inquiry for rural development research in the United States. Current scrutiny of Federal programs calls for better understanding of the reasons for and results of governmental action. Is the public getting what it wants? Is its value for rural America being considered?

For Additional Reading...

Thomas W. Bonnett, *Strategies for Rural Competitiveness: Policy Options for State Governments*, Washington: Council of Governors' Policy Advisors, 1993.

Fern K. Willits and A. E. Luloff, "Urban Pennsylvanians' Misconceptions of Rural Conditions," *Rural Development Perspectives*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Oct. 1994.